

2. Creating Theatrical Performances in the Presence of the Tension Between Textuality and Theatricality

The Changes Theatrical Language has Undergone in the Staging of Contemporary Hungarian Dramas

Theses of a Doctoral Dissertation

I. The subject and purpose of the doctoral research

The paper analyses the relationship between contemporary Hungarian drama and staging practice in order to understand the new tendencies present in Hungarian dramatic art by analysing, from some determined viewpoints, a few theatrical performances whose premieres took place between 1997 and 2005, from the theoretical perspectives of semiotics, reception aesthetics and deconstruction. The notion "contemporary" in the syntagms "contemporary theatre" and "contemporary drama" is being primarily used in the paper referring to an interval of time and not to its aesthetical meaning, referring not only to drama texts and theatrical productions which aim to innovate theatrical form and language and belong to post-modern aesthetics, but also to refer to the texts and performances that were created after the year 1990. The paper takes into account the fact that the change of horizons in modern and then post-modern drama has also brought about a change in the dramatic discourse, creating some new dramatic forms that challenge such genre categories as place, time, plot and character. Nowadays any text that can be used to create a theatrical performance is regarded as a dramatic one. By drama the paper means the verbal material being spoken on the stage, the type of fiction which is meant to be staged and is written according to some given dramatic conventions. Nevertheless, the theatrical performance is not considered to belong to the dramatic text, but it is regarded as a work of art with an autonomous existence. And the system of the signs of which the performance is made up is interpreted as a peculiarly organized language. Since the nineteen sixties, when the post-modernist / post-dramatic trend turned up, which was no more centred on text and plot and did not make use of cause-effect narration, it has become obvious that the acceptance of the type of theatricality and theatre based on the conventional features of word-theatre¹ is not actual any longer. This is exactly the reason why there is some tension in the relationship between text and staging.

It is commonly known that writing plays is widely influenced by the staging practice of the given age but to which extent is the staging practice moulded by the texts written in the same period of time? How do contemporary plays influence the theatre, can they entirely innovate theatrical language? The paper is meant to answer the question: how do the contemporary Hungarian drama texts presented in theatres influence their staging practice? The present research is mainly focussed on those contemporary Hungarian drama texts which can be staged otherwise than Hungarian acting traditions would require, supposing that the analysis of the performances based on these texts will lead to more relevant results in addressing the central issue than the review of performances based on texts which can be easily approached from the traditional psychological-realist acting manner.

György Harag, one of the greatest Hungarian directors in the twentieth century considered continuous innovation to be the most important condition in creating a genuine dramatic art. In this respect he also

¹ The theatre that is based on the superiority of words

emphasized the importance of re-evaluating² the tradition which does not meet any longer or is opposed to the requirements of the age.

The paper attempts to answer the question whether the contemporary Hungarian dramatic texts that cannot be acted out in a traditional way are able or not to re-evaluate the existent theatrical tradition and if they are, how does this become visible in their stagings?

Since the beginning of the nineteen nineties more and more workshops of dramatic art have been receptive to the staging of a rapidly growing number of contemporary Hungarian dramas. In the last decade plays written by Hungarian dramatists were successfully staged not only in Hungarian, but also in theatres from abroad.³ To which extent does contemporary drama give the tone for present-day Hungarian acting practice? In other words: can Hungarian staging practice be innovated from the viewpoint of Hungarian drama?

II. The motivation of the subject

The contemporary Hungarian theatre has been characterized by its attempts to innovate theatrical language and a permanent quest for new theatrical forms since the nineteen nineties. The presence of those young directors whose initiatives contribute to achieve the earlier launched "change in the structure of thinking" has been more and more manifest. They radically query the conventions of the meaning-seeking, realist theatre based on referential text-interpretation and the validity of its premises, and make experiments in order to innovate theatrical language. The new theatricality aims to break with the logocentric acception of the theatre. Whereas the realistically oriented theatre builds its situations and creates its acting characters out of their utterances and the relationships between the characters, the performances of the new theatricality wish to reveal and reinforce the given dramatic situations mainly externally, by means of intricate theatrical signs. This new theatricality is very receptive to apply contemporary Hungarian dramatic texts, which are unburdened by the acting conventions of domestic theatrical tradition.

One of the characteristic features of a mature theatrical culture is the balance between the staging of classical texts and that of new, contemporary texts. This balance seems to be taking shape in Hungary nowadays, although classical works are still outnumbering the new ones in the repertoires of theatres. Some of the contemporary Hungarian dramatic texts are not fit for being staged in the traditional psychological-realist manner, which makes the re-evaluation of the relationship between text and staging be unavoidable in present-day Hungarian theatrical culture.

² "Permanent renewal is the necessary state of the theatre of all times." György Harag: Searching for the secret of the theatre. In: István Nánay (edit.): *Harag György színháza*. Pesti Szalon Publishing House, 1992. 173

³ Among the newest foreign successes of Hungarian drama let's mention the drama entitled *Júlia* by Visky András which took part in the Fringe International Festival in New York and *Liselotte és a május* by Pozsgai Zsolt which was performed in the theatre festival in Avignon.

Júlia by Visky András was the first Hungarian drama to be invited to the Fringe International Festival in New York and it was performed for six times on the stage of the Independent Theater between 10 and 24 August 2007. The *New York Magazine* mentioned the performance entitled *Juliet* among the five most promising ones, out of the 200 that were presented in the festival. The play *Liselotte és a május* by Pozsgai Zsolt was performed for the first time in French in the theatre festival in Avignon on 6th July 2007. The play was directed by its author himself and there were held twenty performances on successive days during the festival.

The relationship between the text meant to be represented on stage and the theatrical performance is basically determined by the position of the theatre in the given culture and the theatre standards existent in that culture. Before the twentieth century the relationship between the text and the performance had not been problematic at all. Playwrights like Sophocles, Aristophanes, Plautus, Shakespeare, Molière, Racine, Goethe, Hugo, Chekhov or Brecht wrote their plays for a given theatre, where their plays were to be staged, thus a kind of mutual influence was established between plays and the theatre. On one hand, when writing their plays, playwrights applied their, often very specific knowledge of the conditions, conventions and general theatrical standards of the time, as well as took into account their personal relationship with the actors of the theatre. On the other hand, if the play required innovations, a new acting manner or an unusual staging modality, the necessary change in the tradition could be applied without difficulty. In this way the dramatic text and the theatre mutually influenced and enriched each other. However, this situation underwent a radical change in the twentieth century. There aren't any longer absolute ethical values, accepted by every member of society, there aren't generally accepted theatrical norms. That is why it is not possible any longer to assume some general guiding principles governing the relationship between text and performance: any kind of staging is conceivable nowadays.

In Hungarian culture "the authority of theatrical tradition is less important than the tradition of the written text, the dramatic text is considered to be the celestial model for all possible performances of all times, the Platonic idea for any stagings".⁴ Some dramatic texts have become canonized literary works "without having passed through the purgatory of staging", which can be explained by the peculiarities of Hungarian theatre tradition. Such plays are those written by László Németh and Áron Tamási, plays that "established little or no relationship with their own staging measurable by aesthetic standards - neither at their creation nor during their after-life"⁵, yet they are considered part of literary history.

The debate between text and theatrical representation has not yet been closed, neither in Hungarian, nor in European culture, that is why it is very necessary to theoretize this relationship, to study its aspects and the practical issues of staging dramatic texts. The evaluation of this relationship has led to the formulation of definite standpoints in contemporary Anglo-Saxon and French culture, where textocentrism and scenocentrism are arguing with each other.⁶ According to the textocentric acception, the theatrical representation has a second-rate importance compared to that of the dramatic text, the performance being only a technical accessory used to make the text visible and audible. The scenocentric view postulates the priority of the theatre performance against the text, holding that the dramatic work is still unfinished as a text, and will only be finished by being acted out on stage. Both acceptions have a common feature: they both see text and staging intimately connected to each other, defining them interdependently: the performance, in order to exist and to be interpretable, belongs to the text, and at the same time the text as such is imperfect, because it needs to be represented in order to get a

⁴ András Visky: Text and space. Space conception in László Németh's plays. In: *Írni és (nem) rendezni*. Koinónia, Kolozsvár, 2002.61.

⁵ András Visky: The playwright. Hermes as an example. In: *Írni és (nem) rendezni*. Koinónia, Kolozsvár, 2002.8.

⁶ About this debate see the book entitled *Analysing Performances* by Patrice Pavis or *Theatre dictionary* by the same author or *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* by Keir Elam (1980).

meaning. The standpoints of twentieth century dramatic science in this respect have been formulated from the viewpoint of theatrical practice as well.⁷

In Hungary the theoretization of this relationship did not remain merely on the level of journalism because this research was stimulated by universities and a special institutional structure, as this is proved by the studies on contemporary theatre written by lecturers belonging to the Dramatic Art Faculty of Veszprém (Pannon) University. Authors like Magdolna Jákfalvi, Árpád Kékesi Kun, Gabriella Kiss, Zoltán Imre have published works that represent a serious challenge to the whole Hungarian dramatic science and critical terminology. The amending of some well-established forms and interpreting strategies of texts and performances has an important role among the issues dealt with in these works.

The phenomenon that contemporary plays have been ordered from their authors by the theatres, either by direct request or by announcing a competition since the beginning of the nineteen nineties points to the change of the relationship between dramatic text and theatrical performance. It is indicative of the fact that the older dramatist-theatre tradition has been revived, which holds that the dramatic text is written ab ovo with the intention to be staged, taking into account the actors and the manner in which it will be acted out, - as this was quite obvious in previous ages of the theatre (ancient Greek theatre, Shakespeare).

III. Premises, methods of analysis

The innovation of the theatre coming from the drama has a tradition in European theatre, but we can also find examples illustrating the fruitful collaboration between contemporary text and theatrical praxis in the history of Hungarian theatre. For instance, the Stanislavsky-made stagings of Chekhov's dramas made the Russian theatrical conventions of the time change radically, innovating theatrical formal language, whereas the English Angry Young Men's literary movement had the same reforming effect in the nineteen sixties. György Harag saw theatrical tradition, drama schools, and "sticking to mannerisms and schemes under the disguise of tradition, serving public taste unconditionally, and giving up the avantgarde style",⁸ as impediments in the way of the innovation of the Hungarian theatre of his time and discovered the secret of finding a new, modern theatrical language in the contemporary (Transylvanian) Hungarian drama. Plays of some contemporary Transylvanian-Hungarian authors⁹ staged by the director Harag used a "metaforic language based on the spectacle"¹⁰, differing widely from the dominant realist one.

Contemporary Hungarian dramas can be interpreted as possibilities to innovate theatrical language as a consequence of the fact, proved by examples from theatrical history, that contemporary dramatic texts bring about a change in theatrical praxis.

The present paper aims not to make a historical survey of the theatrical praxis built on Hungarian texts written since the nineties, instead it presents the characteristic features of a new theatrical language which is taking shape today, through analysing some representative performances. It analyses some performances drawn

⁷ Here I am referring to the works of such authors as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Robert Wilson, Andrei Serban.

⁸ György Harag: Searching for the secret of the theatre. In: István Nánay (edit.): *Harag György színháza*. Pesti Szalon Publishing House, 1992. 173.

⁹ András Sütő, János Székely, Géza Páskándi, István Asztalos, László Csiki, Andor Bajor, Sándor Huszár, László Lőrinczi

¹⁰ István Nánay: Preface of the editor. In: op.cit. 9.

on the interpretation of texts written by contemporary Hungarian dramatists, performances in accordance with and those opposing the traditional psychological-realist theatrical praxis.

The paper interprets dramatic science not only as a historical discipline, but also as an art science, which deals with analysing unique works of art, consequently theatrical performances as well. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory, the paper interprets theatre as a cultural model, where a kind of cultural duplication takes place, in other words the signs generated by cultural systems ever existed are being denoted by the signs created by the theatre. Consequently, it regards contemporary Hungarian theatrical performances as cultural models of our times.

By placing the theatrical performance, and not the text, into the centre of its research, the paper opposes both Hungarian and pre-twentieth century European theatre tradition that deals with the analysis of the text instead of interpreting the performance. The dramatic text is in the centre of debates in Hungarian theatre even nowadays, be it concerned with directorship, analysis or criticism. Naturally, this also has a very practical explanation. As a director, critic or analyser can have only a rather limited experience about the performance itself and the event of the performance, the text – which is seizable, readable, searchable – is still the safest touchstone in conceptions regarding the theatre. As opposed to text-expertise, there are some problems in the field of analysing performances, because theatrical performances have no material in the sense in which literature's material is paper, moving pictures' material is the film roll, music's one is the musical note. Performances are collective creations, whose 'creator', the director, is an interpreter (inclusively in a legal acceptance), as opposed to the dramatist, composer, choreographer and stage designer, who are authors.

A contemporary dramatic text may be accused of being impossible to stage for two reasons: the first one can be that the playwright, – because he has little professional contact with the theatre – does not know the modalities of scenic representation, the space of the theatre, the actors' techniques; the second can be that the play needs another, unusual type of theatre. That is why it is a significant event when a playwright finds the theatre director who can stage his texts adequately. The paper considers it important to analyse the performances which have resulted from the collaboration of the same author-director pairs. A director is a latecomer to the theatre in European culture but he has become an important personality of the performance. Since the 1960's a few directors with clear-cut artistic profiles have emerged in European theatre, such as Peter Brook or Jerzy Grotowski, who have worked with theatre companies made up of actors chosen by them. In Hungarian theatre there are very few of this director type, who dedicates all his life to experimenting in collaboration with a group of actors, playwrights or a whole company. But it is only this kind of activity, opposed to mainstream theatre, that can be expected to make innovations in the field of theatrical language and forms of expression. From this point of view the collaboration between such author-director pairs as Árpád Schilling and István Tasnádi (Krétakör Theatre), Péter Kárpáti and Eszter Novák, or András Visky and Gábor Tompa is an example to be followed.

The paper also reviews stagings based on interpretations of the same text made by different directors, supposing that these can lead to significant insights as to the relationship between text and performance. The interpretations of the performances included in the paper combine the procedures of semiotics with those of reception-aesthetics, endeavouring to surpass the impressionism and relativism of the so-called traditional dramatic criticism, which deals mostly with the dramatic text instead of its scenic representation.

IV. The results of the research

Contemporary Hungarian dramatic texts are exerting an ever increasing pressure on the theatre, making it change its means of expression. The contemporary Hungarian drama can be considered to be an opportunity for the innovation of theatrical language.

There are two clear-cut opposing variants of contemporary Hungarian theatrical language. The first group is made up of the performances representing the traditional psychological-realist line, the second contains the plays belonging to the new theatricality, to the performance-theatre, connected to the postmodernist-postdramatic trend, which challenges the validity of the realist theatrical paradigm and tends to innovate Hungarian staging practice. It is the unusual staging solutions that characterize this group. These solutions are indicative of the modifications undergone by the rules that establish the framework of theatrical creation and reception. These performances, which belong to the kind of theatricality described by Árpád Kékesi Kun, become a visible challenge to the audience (receptor). The cause of this fact is the unusual quantity and rhythm of the stimuli and effects coming through various visual and acoustic channels. Their understanding is more problematic because they do not interpret the connection between text and theatre in a traditional manner, they do not take into account the earlier developed hierarchy of the systems of verbal and non-verbal theatrical signs and they change the horizon of expectations built up by the psychological-realist theatrical code.

The new theatricality, which can be interpreted by means of post-modernist aesthetics, changes the relationship between text and stage. Although linguistic signs do not play a primary role in the sign-system of these performances, language and text are not considered to be disposable. These performances are characterized by the fact that they put an end to the referentiality of text-interpretations, because they theatricalize not the text by all means, but the variants according to which the text can be interpreted. They also raise the awareness of "the full circle of representation", because using strong theatrical effects (sound, spectacle) they create the theatrical illusion, while they are continuously reflecting on the presence of the illusion.

The trends of the new theatricality aiming to innovate theatrical language lead to the capability of dramatic science to re-evaluate the relationship between text and its theatrical representation in Hungarian culture. By sketching the contemporary situation of this relationship and its directions of change, the present paper may be a starting point for further research in this field. The new theatricality views the theatrical performance as a public space for communication, which enables the viewers to perform the social ritual of theatre-going. That is why the performances drawn on this group of contemporary dramatic texts revive the function of the theatre that it had in ancient Greece, namely the art of communication in agoras. However, the question how the social role of the theatre is re-evaluated by the new theatricality still remains the subject of further research.

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